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United States Senate  
Concerning  
Fire and the National Fire Plan**

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MR. CHAIRMAN AND MEMBERS OF THE COMMITTEE:

Thank you for the opportunity to meet with you today. I am Rick Cables, Regional Forester for the Rocky Mountain Region, USDA Forest Service. At the outset, Mr. Chairman, I want to thank you and members of the Committee for your support of the National Fire Plan and fire management program and, most importantly, for your support of our firefighting community. Our firefighters do an impressive job under adverse conditions and they deserve our thanks and admiration.

Today I will talk about the potentially severe fire season now underway, and how the land-managing agencies and our partners in the Rocky Mountain area are making preparations. While we prepare to fight fire this season as best we can, fighting wildland fires is only one aspect of the work we must do to protect communities and restore ecosystems.

Fires in recent years, especially those that have occurred in the Front Range, have heightened our collective awareness for firefighter and public safety. The Buffalo Creek Fire, started six years ago today, when I was the Pike/San Isabel Forest Supervisor, clearly illustrated the impact and cost of the offsite effects of wildfire as experienced by the effects of sedimentation on Strontia Reservoir. The Hi Meadow Fire in June 2000 showed us not only the impact of losing homes, it also demonstrated that vegetation

management along with the use of prescribed fire can make a difference in the reducing the severity and spread of wildland fire.

### **The Fire Situation and Outlook**

The outlook is for a severe fire season this year. As you know, we have already experienced a number of wildland fires in Region 2. The Interior West continues to experience severe drought conditions. Our below average snow packs and early runoff have affected a wide cross section of users and communities. For us, it means that fuel moistures in the forests have not recharged and in many areas are at lower levels than 2000, a very difficult fire year.

The National Interagency Fire Center (NIFC) in Boise has provided us with a long range weather outlook for later this summer and fall that calls for generally warmer than normal temperatures in the West. Rainfall, however, is predicted to be near normal through this period. The high temperatures and near normal precipitation coupled with the extended drought conditions increases the fire potential in the Rockies this summer and fall.

### **Wildland Fire Preparedness**

Each year, the interagency effort in Region 2 works to provide an overarching effort in all elements of the fire management programs. These include prevention and public activities, preparation and initial attack, large fire support, fuels reduction programs and effective support of communities in a host of cooperative efforts. Interagency cooperation has long been the cornerstone of effective wildand fire fighting. In Colorado, this has been evident with the excellent working relationships between Federal, Tribal, State, Local governments and a host of dedicated volunteers. The cooperation is most evident in Colorado State Forest Service's sponsorship of the annual Wildland Fire Academy. This interagency effort continues to be anchored in providing standards for safety and coordination, offers a variety of wildland fire training courses and is attended by well over 900 firefighters. The effort has spawned similar efforts in New York and Texas.

We in the Rocky Mountain Region consciously focus on safety. We have taken a pledge “never to forget”. The legacy of the South Canyon Fire in Glenwood Springs remains with us and continues to guide us in our efforts. Firefighting is a high risk, high consequence activity, and the Forest Service has always had strong firefighter safety and training programs. This year, however, following the Thirty-Mile Fire tragedy in July 2001, where four firefighters lost their lives, nationally we have redoubled our efforts. The Thirty-Mile tragedy prompted an examination of the programs to identify areas needing improvement. The areas identified include managing firefighter fatigue, reinforcing use of the 10 Standard Fire Orders and the 18 Watch Out situations, and developing training to avoid entrapment by fire. All of these improvements in training and safety are in place for this fire season. We are committed to doing everything we can to improve firefighter safety.

We have also purchased and maintained firefighter personal protection gear and engines, other vehicles, and contracted for helicopters and airtankers services. Preparedness also includes assisting other Federal agencies, Tribes and States with fire training programs, planning assistance, shared equipment use contracts, and support for interagency fire coordination centers.

In 2001, we made a great start toward increasing our preparedness resources, thanks to the National Fire Plan funding. In Region 2, the Forest Service treated over 58,000 acres to reduce fuel loads and protect priority communities at risk. We will continue this success in FY 2002 and are funded to treat approximately 70,000 acres. We are in the process of completing another revision of the “Red Zone” assessment for Colorado in cooperation with the Colorado State Forester and Department of the Interior agencies. We are completing a similar assessment in Wyoming in partnership with the Wyoming State Forester and our Interior counterparts in Wyoming. These kinds of assessments will help us prioritize preparedness and fuel treatments in those States.

In FY 2001, we hired approximately an additional 182 new permanent employees and 289 seasonal firefighters that brought our firefighting workforce to near 800 permanent and seasonal employees. We also acquired 13 additional engines. That figure includes

an additional 20 person hotshot crew (the Roosevelt Hotshots in Fort Collins). In 2002, we are bringing on an additional hotshot crew on the San Juan NF, bringing the Region's total to 5 hotshot crews. Our additional investments in upgrading airtanker bases have already proven to be effective investments, both in initial attack and for large fire support. We continue to monitor fire conditions and this year have already fought fire as early as January. We have been proactive with the use of severity funding and brought additional resources such as helicopters and airtankers on early. In addition, we are working hard at bringing on fire personnel early and where appropriate adjusted training to insure that all personnel meet currency standards before being assigned. The Snaking Fire and the Black Mountain Fire, both with high potential for damage in the wildland urban interface, demonstrated lessons learned with increased coordination and improved tactical operations among cooperating fire fighting agencies.

Interagency coordination and oversight with Interior agencies and State and local agencies is active in Colorado, Wyoming, Nebraska, South Dakota and to a lesser degree in Kansas. Coordination taskforces and teams meet regularly to evaluate programs and identify priorities. Their collective focus is on effective planning and program delivery at the local level. In Colorado for example, the interagency effort is focused on working with Colorado Counties Incorporated to prepare county-wide fire management plans. In addition, we have co-sponsored an innovative approach to public education and fire prevention in a cooperative effort with the Red Cross. The Interior agencies and the Forest Service have established teams in Wyoming and Colorado to expedite consultation required by the Endangered Species Act.

In addition to our federal firefighting crews, we call upon many other firefighting forces for assistance. Our working relationship with our State and local partners has never been stronger. Often, State and local firefighters are the first to respond to fire incidents.

### **Community Assistance**

In Region 2, the Forest Service provided over \$ 9 million to states, volunteer fire departments, and local communities to assist firefighting activities in 2001 and 2002.

With these grants our State and local government partners purchased fire equipment for volunteer fire departments, Rural Fire Departments and developed hazard mitigation plans and projects. Agreements have been made and grants awarded to provide a wide range of fuels activities with efforts ongoing and still underway. In addition, we have contributed to community fire planning, developed market utilization of small diameter material removed through thinning activities, and conducted fire prevention and fire education training.

It is important to note that we and other land management agencies have updated fire management plans to be consistent with Federal wildland fire policy, with a goal to have all plans updated in 2004, if not sooner. Region 2 has updated approximately 50% of our plans and will complete the remainder before 2004. The fire management plans are important because they are the major link to land and resource management plans and provide the guidance for fire management officers, line officers and incident commanders to plan for fire management programs, and to make decisions when an incident occurs, as to the appropriate techniques and tactics for effective wildland fire response.

### **2002 Fire Season Readiness**

With the forecast for a severe wildland fire season, Region 2 began early and continues to bring fire readiness capacity to its highest level. We currently have approximately 715 permanent and seasonal firefighters available Region-wide. We are also currently recruiting additional firefighting resources and expect to have 50 more firefighters by the end of June.

When we realized the severity of the wildland fire outlook, we began to hire seasonal firefighters early and we are working to place firefighting crews and equipment in locations where they can be mobilized quickly and effectively.

When local areas anticipate or experience above normal fire activity, we have the authority, through what is known as “severity funding”, to provide suppression funds to those units so that they can bring in additional staff and equipment to improve initial and

extended attack response capabilities and increase prevention activities. Already this year, the Forest Service has approved authority of over \$800,000 for severity assistance for Region 2. Federal wildland fire agencies have enhanced initial attack capabilities by pre-positioning resources ranging from airtankers, to hand crews, to engines in strategic locations.

### **Reducing Fuel Loads**

Fighting wildland fire is only one part of addressing the long-term buildup of hazardous fuels in our forests and grasslands. Reducing the risks and consequences of severe wildland fires is a high priority for the Administration. Bipartisan Congressional support has provided the Forest Service and the Department of Interior with the necessary funding to increase the amount of acreage treated to reduce risks to communities and ecosystems. The importance of reducing fuel loads has been recognized for some time as an important issue in Region 2. The Rocky Mountain Region maintains an active internet website to track and display information about the National Fire Plan. This site provides the viewer with a spatial view of fuels projects along with project descriptions and key contacts. You can sort projects by state, congressional district, county and forest. Also, in Colorado, we have utilized the Colorado “Good Neighbor” Agreement process to allow the Colorado State Forest Service to work on National Forest System lands to aid in conducting hazardous fuel treatment projects that affect both agencies.

Nationally, the Departments are beginning this year to develop a common interagency fire budget planning process that will better refine wildland fire management readiness resources. The process will provide all agencies with a uniform, performance-based system for identifying the preparedness resources necessary to deliver a cost effective fire management program. This system will be deployed by the 2004 fire season and will influence readiness decisions for the 2005 fire season. Region 2 will be part of this effort.

## **Restoration and Rehabilitation**

In addition to preparedness and hazardous fuels reduction, the Region has a number of extensive restoration and rehabilitation projects that were the result of the fires of 2000 and 2001. The Region received over \$7 million in FY 2001. This funding was used to complete restoration projects on land impacted by fires such as Jasper on the Black Hills National Forest, Hi Meadows on the Pike and San Isabel National Forests and the Bobcat Fire on the Arapaho and Roosevelt National Forests. Projects funded and completed included noxious weed control, hazard tree mitigation along roads and trails, erosion control measures, and private property corner re-establishment. In FY 2002 the region received over \$5 million to continue the restoration activities on the fires of 2000 and do additional work on 2001 fires.

## **Research**

The Rocky Mountain Research Station, headquartered in Fort Collins, is active in National Fire Plan research across 13 states of the Interior West. Station scientists received \$8.2 million of National Fire Plan funds for fuels and fire research in the Rockies and West. Their studies will provide valuable information to support implementation of the National Fire Plan by our forest managers in Region 2 and other states. In Colorado alone, station scientists received over \$1.3 million to support studies designed to:

- provide effective alternatives for managing fuels in fire-prone and fire-dependent ecosystems in Colorado and the Black Hills;
- provide ways for the Forest Service and the public to better understand and build consensus on fire management strategies;
- use satellite imagery to determine how insects, diseases and other disturbances may create fire hazards and influence the incidence and spread of wildfire;
- use high-resolution satellite imagery to provide models for forecasting fire weather and the impacts of smoke from fires.
- determine patterns of regeneration of white pine trees after fire and the effect these patterns may have on the spread of white pine blister rust disease.

These studies are coordinated with scientists at Colorado State University, the University of Colorado, Colorado School of Mines, and state and federal land management agencies.

In addition, station scientists are conducting long-term monitoring of the Jasper Fire recovery in the Black Hills and assessing alternatives for managing the South Platte River watershed here in Colorado.

### **Summary**

As stated earlier, the outlook is for a potentially severe fire season this year. The Forest Service in partnership with the other federal land-managing agencies and with our partners at the State and local level are doing all that we can to be prepared for this fire season. We will continue to do everything we can to ensure the safety of firefighters, communities, and resources. We will continue to cooperate and communicate among Federal agencies, States, local governments, Tribes and interested groups and citizens to ensure the long-term safety and health of communities and resources in our care.

This concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman. I would be happy to answer any questions you and the members of the committee may have.